An Analysis of the Boy in “Araby” and J. Alfred Prufrock in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock from the Perspective of Inferiority Complex

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Abstract. James Joyce and T. S. Eliot are representative of the modern literature. Through “Araby” and The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, they all showed the characters who lived in the modern environment and they shared some similarities in personality. Characters are the core in the work. So, the thesis will focus on the analysis of the deep sense of the change of protagonists. The boy in “Araby” and Prufrock are both influenced by the Inferiority Complex. Their tragedies are caused by the feeling of inferior. The Inferiority Complex, which plays a key role in the personality development, is put forward by Alfred Adler, an Austrian medical doctor. And the thesis will explore the characters from the perspective of the Inferiority Complex mainly through three parts, symptoms, caustic factors and the results of the protagonists. Their love tragedies were actually caused by the Inferiority Complex.

1. Introduction

James Joyce and T. S. Eliot both are representative personages of Modernism. And Joyce was regarded as one of the greatest novelists in English literature. He had made marvelous achievements in the field of modern novel. “Araby” is chosen from his short story collection Dubliners. His writing is exquisite and reflects a “Flaubert” style. It tells a story that a boy vaguely fell in love with “Mangan’s sister”, Joyce truthfully shows us the psychological movement of the boy through detail descriptions. The boy in the novel was shamed of expressing his love and always felt lonely. He was an outcast in love and family relationship. And in Eliot’s poem The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, the poet also depicted the same predicament. J. Alfred Prufrock was a typical twentieth century disillusioned intellectual, the poetry reflects his interior monologue while he was on way proposing a marriage to a lady. He was unconfident, timid and anxious, hesitating all the way. Finally, he gave up his intention of proposing. The boy in “Araby” and J. Alfred Prufrock has a lot of distinctions in common, although the authors wrote in different form, they both manifested the psychological state of the protagonist. Inferiority Complex is an important concept in the field of individual psychology, which was first put forward by an Austrian psychiatrist Alfred Adler. When a man faces a dilemma or problem, he cannot figure a way out because of his mental disabilities. Twentieth century had seen the World War and Depression, people were traumatized both mentally and physically.

2. Symptoms of Inferiority Complex

The individuals, who are heavily influenced by Inferiority Complex, usually lack love from the others and stick to a different standard between themselves and others, thus they become self-doubt,
irritable and easily deny themselves. Inferiority Complex was put forward by Alfred Adler, in his famous book, *What Life Could Mean to You*, he explained that individual’s willpower, competence, and initial striving for mastery decide the fate of an individual.

2.1. Symptoms in “Araby”

Back in the original story itself, from the very beginning, the boy seemed to live in his dream and stays away from the reality. He lived in his uncle’s house and he was isolated from his friends, teachers, his uncle and aunt. Definitely, the whole family lacked the resonance among them. First of all, the boy remained an outsider to his family members. His uncle was always busy, and his aunt did not know him well. They lack any intimate conversation between them. Unluckily, when the boy told to his uncle, there is an interesting description about boy’s uncle: “He was fussing at the hallstand, looking for the hat-brush, and answered me curtly.” [4] Another word to say is that his uncle did not put the boy’s thing at heart. Living in such loveless family environment, the boy became sensitive to others and was not willing to express his feelings. According to Adler’s individual psychology, the inferiority feelings would be stronger especially for individuals when they are young. Children are not mature enough to tackle with their feelings, so at this time, the companionship of family is crucial. Secondly, the boy seemed to be separated from his companion and teachers. When the boy is in school, he just could not fit into the school life, he found the school life was tedious and boring. And the author paid a lot attention to the boy’s mental activity, it writes like this: “I wished to annihilate the tedious intervening days. I chafed against the work of school.” [4] Though he played with his friends in school, he wasn’t happy indeed, he found that his friends and teachers did not understand him. In his eyes, playing with the friends and going to school looked more like a task. He found Mangan’s sister attractive, but he felt inferior to Mangan’s sister when he confronted her. He felt his body like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers. He felt small and inferior in front of the girl. He found all the beauties in Mangan’s sister, but he was too shy to start a decent conversation with her, what’s more, the most ironical thing is that the boy even did not mention the girl’s name. So, in this way, the boy was even remained a foreigner to the girl he had crushed upon. Thirdly, from a deeper sense, the boy was isolated from the whole adult society. The way the boy showed his love was to go to the bazaar and buy something for the Mangan’s sister. But the schoolwork and his uncle’s lateness made his dream shattered. Finally, when he arrived at the bazaar, the lights went out, a lot of stored had been closed. Only darkness was left behind, the salesgirl was flirting with two men and was cold to him. His expectation for the magical place completely broke. He found the adult world vain and fake, he was angry at the adult world at the same time he was mad at himself. In this sense, he had to accept the rule in adult world, his love would be a fantasy. At last, the mental activity of the boy was: “gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.” [4] He found the painful truth that he was an outsider to the whole adult society.

2.2. Symptoms in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

*The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock* can be seen as a dramatic monologue, it demonstrates the psychological changes when the protagonist Prufrock trying to pay court to the lady he loved. But on the road to propose, he delayed and hesitated all the way. Finally, he had no energy to take an action and put himself in his fantasy. In the beginning of the poem, Prufrock was passing through the quiet street. At first, he made his mind to propose the marriage to the lady. Though his mind was occupied with the stuff, Prufrock was a careful observer. He saw the street, watched the yellow
fog on the windowpanes and even the small poll on the streets. He looked peaceful, but in his mind, he was struggling with himself. He was not confident enough and was afraid of being laughed at by others. So, he was thinking of the proper behaviors while facing the lady. He even thought about the situation in lady’s house: “women come and go/ talking of Michelangelo”. [1] This sentence was appeared several times in the poem, which showed that Prufrock thought a lot about the lady. Prufrock did not overcome his fear. In the remained stanza, Prufrock asked himself questions one by one: “Do I dare?”, “So how I should presume?” and “How should I begin?” [1] And at the end of the poem, Prufrock escaped and he went to the seaside. These are salient examples of the hesitation of Prufrock. Because to him, the lady was beautiful, she wore dress that put the perfume on and her arms are decorated by bracelet and shined white under the lamplight. Comparing to Prufrock, the lady was perfect. Thus, Prufrock wanted to show his best part in front of the lady and lady’s friends.

3. Causes of Inferiority Complex

In the beginning of “Araby”, the author used several adjective words to describe the living condition of the boy in North Richmond street: blind and quiet. It sets a gloomy atmosphere around the street. The house there were inhabited, people who lived there are numb, they had unexcited faces. In this way, the relationship among people was exactly cold and fragile. As in the story, the boy lived with his aunt and uncle. His parents were absent in his childhood. His uncle was a businessman, who was always busy with his work. And his aunt was interested in the gossip than her nephew. So, the boy was ignored by all his family members. When he fell in love with a girl he could not explain the contradictory situation to his family members. When late at night, he was alone to take the train and go to the bazaar. The undo of his family members made the boy feel even more desperate than ever before. Just like the boy under the pen of James Joyce, the individual was at the mercy of the outside forces and inner conflicts. And their efforts to overcome the Inferiority Complex were in vain. And J. Alfred Prufrock was a typical 20th century intellectual, and he was actually the product of the time. Exploring the causes of his Inferiority Complex can let us learn more about the 20th century and its society. From beginning of the poem, in the eye of the Prufrock, the whole city was a wasteland. He invited the listener to walk with him in the evening. He was numb and sick inside, he felt that even the beautiful evening was just “like a patient etherized upon a table.” [4] The romantic evening did not appear anymore. It suggested that the evening was lifeless and listless. And the world was like an etherized patient in hospital, now everything in the world was calm on “the restless nights.” And the streets under Eliot’s pen were half-deserted. The hotel stood on the street was cheap and full of oyster-shells, which meant that the environment was dirty and dark. In the Prufrock’ eyes, the streets are compared with a “tedious argument”, which indicated that the principle in the world made people lost with confusion.

4. Results

According to Adler, everyone has a feeling of inferiority, but the feeling of inferiority is not a disease and it is not detriment to health if one can take the right attitude to handle it. However, if it is not handled properly, it will become a pathological condition and bring about unexpected consequences. The feeling might be manifested in withdrawal from social connections and criticism of others, fear and worry and some people will give up their original plan. Absolutely, the protagonists did not overcome their feelings in a correct way and the Inferiority Complex leads to their unhappy endings. The boy in “Araby” finally knew the truth about the adult world and realized that he was nothing special. In the end, James wrote that: “gazing up into the darkness I saw myself
as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.”[1] The boy had done all could to try to express his love, but finally he found the harsh reality that he could not get closer to the girl. The girl was beautiful and lived under the sun, she represented the pretty images in boy’s heart. And after the journey to the bazaar, the boy realized that how fake the adult world was and he did not have the ability to change something. This epiphany was a painful process, and this epiphany destroy boy’s intention completely. He grew from an innocent young boy to a mature man. As for Prufrock, in the end of the poem, Prufrock realized that he could not win the lady’s heart, so he finally quit his courtship. This also demonstrates that the people in modern society cannot love though they hoped to pursue love and a happy life.

5. Conclusions

It is obvious that the thesis discussed the Inferiority Complex of the two characters mainly from three layers: symptoms, causes and results. In the end, defects in their personality led to the same love tragedies. The boy in “Araby” gave up halfway and felt angry about himself while he was buying a gift to the girl he loved. Prufrock hesitated all the way to the lady’s house and finally abandoned his courtship. This thesis not only analyzes the two characters from a perspective related to psychology but also gives us the suggestion for the healthy development of people in the modern time. The boy in “Araby” and Prufrock can represent the intellectuals at that time, but they are not happy and lack the ability to fully express themselves. Nowadays, people live a stressful life, and a lot of attention should be focused on the people’s mental health.

References


